Gardner asks Bush to call flood areas disaster

News Tribune staff and The Associated Press

Gov. Booth Gardner Sunday signed a letter asking President Bush to declare a major disaster in 13 Washington counties hit by recent storms and flooding.

He has also requested immediate financial relief for Lewis County, where the worst damaged occurred and two people were killed by floodwaters.

"This disaster is of such severity and magnitude that effective response and recovery is beyond the capabilities of the state and affected local governments," Gardner said in the letter.

Gardner said in a statement that early estimates indicated more than $1.1 million in damage to public facilities in Lewis County alone. Preliminary estimates showed that total damage in the 13 counties totaled $7.2 million.

In addition, the flooding of the Centralia dump and the Centralia and Chehalis sewage treatment plants had raised widespread concern over the safety of water from private wells in that area of Lewis County, the statement said.

Besides Lewis County, counties cited by Gardner were Benton, Cowlitz, Garfield, Grays Harbor, King, Pacific, Pierce, Thurston, Wahkiakum, Walla Walla, Whitman and Yakima.

The eight Western Washington counties were damaged by floods and rainstorms, while the five Eastern Washington counties were hit by high winds of up to 130 mph.

The request is to be forwarded to Bush today through the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

This could result in the opening of federal aid offices and the flow of federal funds early this week, said regional FEMA chief Ray Williams. If Gov. Gardner's request is approved by the president, disaster relief would be made available to both public and private entities, according to the governor's office.

On Sunday, six FEMA employees were in the agency's office in Bothell gathering reports on storm damage, primarily from Lewis County, which had flooded farmlands, as well as flooding in Centralia, Chehalis and the small town of Oakville. Floodwaters from the Chehalis and Skookumchuck rivers closed 12 miles of Interstate 5 near the two larger cities for three days last week. Some 395 residences and 80 businesses were damaged by flooding in Lewis County.

It could take a couple of weeks for federal, state and local officials to gather all the information needed to how much relief is needed, said Mark Stewart of the state Emergency Management Division.

Red Cross volunteers around Centralia, Chehalis, Oakville and the Chehalis Indian Reservation continued to help some 3,500 people who left their homes because of flooding along the Chehalis River and some of its tributaries.

Federal money would come from a variety of sources, some requiring local matching money, for road work and other repairs to public facilities and for individuals and business owners, Williams said.

Prisoners dying of AIDS

Afflicted child molester stirs 'dying with dignity' debate

Railroad again trying to abandon Palouse lines

The Associated Press

COLFAX — A renewed proposal by Union Pacific Railroad Co. to abandon two rail freight lines on the Palouse could complicate ongoing negotiations to lure an independent rail operator into the area, rail supporters say.

Nebraska-based Union Pacific announced it intends to refile an application Friday to pull out about 69 miles of its Tekoa and Pleasant Valley rail tracks in northern Whitman County.

The railroad company says the lines serving the nation's biggest lentil-growing region are no longer profitable.

The federal Interstate Commerce Commission last summer denied the first request for abandonment on a technicality, saying financial data to support the action was outdated.

Rail supporters contend the lines are critical to the Palouse's agricultural industry and to saving the area's road system.

The tracks run through prime pea- and lentil-producing acreage. Growers claim they need the rail service between grain elevators and processing plants from Thornton to Seltice and from Colfax to Fairfield to stay competitive on world export markets.

"The tracks are vital," said Harold Blain, president of the Idaho-Washington Dry Pea and Lentil Commission in Moscow, Idaho, which is trying to determine how to fight the rail pullout.

"If they remove those tracks the way they say they will, that's the last time you'll ever see the railroads in this part of the country," Blain said.

The railroad company counters that the freight lines have lost shipping business to barge haulers over the years and aren't turning a profit.

Rail supporters have been working with shipper and smaller-rail operators to get another company to take over the lines since the ICC rejected Union Pacific's first application for abandonment.

Renewed fighting over the proposed abandonment will complicate those ongoing negotiations, said Jim Weddell of the Port of Whitman County.

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>
> — Harold Blain

Three regional rail companies have expressed interest in piecing together a local rail system but all of them would need outside money to help with the initial purchase of inactive and abandoned tracks, Weddell said.

There is also concern that the loss of rail traffic will increase the numbers of heavy trucks on Whitman County roads, causing them to deteriorate.

The train tracks from Thornton to Seltice and from Colfax to Fairfield serve at least eight major pea and lentil processors and numerous other grain elevators.

Some 25,000 metric tons of lentils and 45,000 metric tons of peas were shipped from the region by rail last year, Blain said.

Washington state officials have until Tuesday to gather information proving that the Tekoa and Pleasant Valley rail tracks should be given high priority when about $7 million in federal low-interest loans is doled out this year, said James Shanafelt of the state Department of Transportation.

Funds made available through the Local Rail Service Assistance Program could help a short-line operator buy up lines and rights of way that are abandoned by larger railroad companies, Shanafelt said.

But eligible tracks have to be part of the state's own tally of threatened rail links to qualify, and the two lines are not currently on the list, Shanafelt said.

An average of 132 miles of track in Washington state were abandoned each year during the past decade, said James Jackson of the Transportation Department.

Jackson said the department has sent surveys to shippers and others affected by the proposed abandonment to determine whether the state Utilities and Transportation Commission will oppose it before the ICC.

Efforts to find a replacement short line railroad are taken into consideration when the state commission is deciding whether to oppose the abandonment, Jackson said.

"If it looks like there is any possibility, we try to see if there are any interested parties that could conceivably run a viable short line," he said.

Allen Scott of the state Utilities and Transportation Commission said the abandonment process takes a minimum of nine months after the railroad files its petition.

There is a 30-day public protest period after the filing and then the ICC must decide whether to investigate the protesters' claims, he said.

Meanwhile, the state transportation agencies consult with shippers and others to verify the financial figures provided by the railroad, he said.